

Strategising as identity work: creating heroes in international contracting

Conference or Workshop Item

Published Version

Ulutas Duman, D. and Green, S. D. (2018) Strategising as identity work: creating heroes in international contracting. In: 34th Annual ARCOM conference, 3-5 September, Queens University Belfast. Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/79824/>

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Published version at: <http://www.arcom.ac.uk/abstracts-results.php?s=34th%20Annual%20ARCOM%20Conference&v=&i=&b=b&p=14940#14940>

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STRATEGIZING AS IDENTITY WORK: CREATING HEROES IN INTERNATIONAL CONTRACTING

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There has been little emphasis on the role of narratives in competitive strategy within the context of construction management research. This paper draws from the 'narrative turn' in organisation studies to explore strategizing activity through the lens of 'identity work'. It is argued that identity construction is a process whereby individuals create temporal narratives for the purposes of legitimising themselves and their actions. Such processes refer to a continuous and temporal interaction between different levels whereby self-identities are formed by mobilizing resources from lived experience and accepted formalised narratives. The empirical analysis focuses on strategy narratives within the Turkish international contracting sector. Turkish firms are famed for their ability to work in challenging markets. Of particular interest is the way in which managers within Turkish contractors commonly ascribe to themselves a self-identity as heroes who constantly strive to overcome adversity. Such ongoing processes of identity work are seen to progressively shape not only the trajectory of individual contracting firms, but also the Turkish construction sector as a whole.

Keywords: narrative turn, identity work, strategizing, Turkish contractors

INTRODUCTION

"We can be heroes just for one day" (David Bowie, 1977)

Competitive strategy in international construction has long been an area of interest for construction management researchers. Much of the literature is informed by prescriptive practices such as Porter's diamond model or SWOT analysis (cf. Porter, 1985). Such studies tend to conceptualize competitive strategy on the level of organisations seeking to position themselves within a supposedly stable and predictable landscape (i.e. Ofori, 1994; Zhao *et al.*, 2009). More recently, the approach known as Strategy as Practice (SaP) has challenged these by emphasising the role of individual actors in the 'doing of strategy' (Whittington, 2006). The competitive strategy discussion in construction management has also increasingly shifted towards accentuating the socially constructed and discursive nature of competitive strategy (i.e. Green *et al.*, 2008; Kao *et al.*, 2009). However, as yet little attention has been given to understanding strategy as a form of 'identity work'. The reported research argues that the doing of strategy takes place by means of the temporal narratives through which individuals seek to establish 'subject positions' both for themselves and their organizations (Fenton and Langley, 2011). On this basis, the paper conceptualises 'identity work' as a key strategy practice which is

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directly implicated in shaping the future trajectory of Turkish international contractors.

For the purposes of the current paper, identity work is seen as a continuously enacted process in which individuals interpret themselves within the intersection of their past experiences, present realities and future expectations (Ricoeur, 1991). This transient and fluid interpretation of identity construction implies that self-identities are continuously contested concepts rather than fixed constructs. In the enactment of such a process, individuals draw from numerous established, overlapping and interrelated narratives at the organizational or sectoral level (Coupland and Brown, 2012). They can also be seen to utilise literary plot structures to construct subject positions for themselves and others with whom they interact (Brown and Humphreys, 2003). These plot structures offer alternative ways to describe organisational events by infusing different meanings into the narrative elements. Drawing from the narrative approach to strategy and using the notions of epic plot, the current paper aims to understand the process of identity construction in the Turkish international contracting sector. The analysis is based on 31 face-to-face interviews with senior managers from Turkish firms. Of particular interest is the way in which the heroic self-identities of managers are formed by mobilizing resources from pre-existing formalized narratives. The findings illustrate the way that 'overcoming adversity' becomes an essential facet of self-identity of individual managers with direct implications for the future trajectory of Turkish construction sector as a whole.

Academic Narratives of Competitive Strategy

Strategy as a Property of Organizations

Much of the competitive strategy research in construction management is informed by notions of rationality and predictability. A recurring tendency is to identify the strategies which firms can adopt to enter different markets or otherwise increase their performances. An especially important point of reference is Porter's diamond model by which companies are assumed to analyse the external forces in the market place for the purposes of positioning themselves (cf. Porter, 1985). Ofori (1994) notably adopted this perspective to discuss performance improvement strategies for Singapore's construction industry. Öz (2001) also mobilized the diamond model as a means of analysing the sources of competitive advantage for Turkish international contractors. Such studies have undoubtedly been useful in terms of progressing the debate. However, they focus only on exogenous factors and tend to suggest trajectories of improvement based on assumptions of stability and predictability. Similarly, SWOT analysis has received wide acceptance as a means of determining the strengths and weaknesses of construction firms as positioned against an assumed static set of exogenous factors (Zhao *et al.*, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2011). The limitation of these studies is that they tend to treat the external operating environment as a static objective reality which can be characterised on the basis of a pre-determined set of factors. More importantly, both approaches conceptualize competitive strategy as something that can be defined, measured and (allegedly) improved. However, such objectivist and acontextual perspectives are directly challenged by the recognition of the complexities of strategy making in practice (cf. Mintzberg, 1987). Of note is the emergence of the 'strategy process school' which accentuates the broader historical and political context within which 'strategy in flight' must be understood (cf. Pettigrew, 1997). However, even these approaches fail fully to recognise the shift toward seeing organizations in terms of their essential temporality (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). To date, the construction management literature has tended to under-

emphasise the fluid, transient and ephemeral nature of strategy making (cf. Green *et al.*, 2008).

From Doing of Strategy to the Narrating of Strategy

Developed as an extension of the process school, the strategy-as-practice (SaP) Approach sees strategy as a socially situated activity (Whittington, 2006). It accentuates the continuously contested nature of strategy making by moving the focus of analysis to micro practices on individual level. As such, it shifts the discussion from strategy as an entity which is possessed towards a process of permanent enactment. However, discursive and narrative approaches to understanding strategy have only been recognised relatively recently (i.e. Fenton and Langley, 2011). Researchers who adopt more critical and discursive approaches to construction management tend to stress the dynamic and embedded nature of strategy making (Green *et al.*, 2008; Kao *et al.*, 2009). They conceptualise competitive strategy as an unfolding discourse which is in a constant flux and transformation. For them, the practices which are involved in strategy making can only be understood in retrospect, i.e. past practices are only labelled strategic for the purposes of making an argument about the future. Similarly, Löwstedt and Räisänen (2012) apply a narrative approach to understanding strategic change in a construction company by comparing formal and individual narratives. However, with this notable exception, the potential of narrative methods has remained relatively unexplored in the context of construction management research.

Strategizing as Identity Work

The ‘narrative turn’ accepts organisations as socially constructed, emergent and processual arenas (Tsoukas, 1994). Organizations, in this sense, become the arenas within which individuals develop, rehearse or test their narratives of self-identity. Hence identity construction depends upon a process whereby temporal narratives about the past are created for the purposes of legitimising actions (cf. Fenton and Langley, 2011). Such narratives hence become ways of ascribing meaning to ourselves and to our day-to-day practices. More importantly, the way that the individuals connect with the past is seen to carry through into the present thereby setting out a trajectory for the future. Identity work conflates with strategy making as both can be seen to be essentially concerned with constituting an overall sense of direction for ourselves (Oliver, 2015). However, as yet little attention has been given to the extent to which strategy can be understood as identity work that are incessantly contested through negotiation and re-construction. The available formalized narratives and managers’ own collections of lived experience provide key resources. As argued by Brown (2015), identity work taking place in the present can only be understood with reference to both an-imagined past and a desired future. For example, Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014) suggest that identity work on the individual level draws more from a collective identity accepted on the sectoral level rather than the single firm.

Empirical Study: Creating Heroes

The essential starting point for the empirical study is that the narratives rehearsed by practitioners provide windows into the micro-processes of strategy making. Yet practitioners do not talk about strategy in a detached manner; they like talking about strategy because it boosts their sense of self-identity. It also enables them to project their sense of self-identity onto others. In such process, the choice of characters, turning points and the structure of the plot become the key activities of identity work

(Brown, 2015). It should further be noted that self-identity is not about the factual representation of what happened, it is how the meaning is infused through the devices used to construct narratives (Gabriel, 2000). There are a number of stereotypical plot structures -i.e. epic, tragic, and comic- derived from literature which can be used to conduct narrative analysis in organisational studies (Czarniawska, 2004). These can be adopted by managers for the purposes of defining the 'subject positions' which are of central importance in identity work. The empirical analysis described below draws from the tradition of narrative enquiry to explore the extent to which the narratives espoused by managers are structured around the notions of epic plot structure. The expectation is that narratives are structured around a 'hero' who conducts a noble journey towards a successful outcome. It might further be expected that such heroes would be depicted as displaying courage and dedication in overcoming predicaments and challenges along the way. Table 1 presents the elements of a typical epic plot structure which was used as an analytical device to interpret the empirical data. It is taken as axiomatic that all individual narratives formulate temporal subject positions through the mobilization of narrative elements. It is important to emphasise that such a perspective does not accentuate any objective reality or fact; it rather highlights the discursive nature of strategy and the way it is inexorably conflated with identity construction (i.e. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Table 1: Characteristics of the epic plot

Narrative elements of epic plot	The narrative elements of the Turkish contractors narrative
Protagonist	Heroic owner-leaders and key senior managers
Other characters	Dedicated Turkish employees (helper), government (adversary), Western and Chinese competitors (villains)
Plot focus	Expansion into new markets and project types, adapting to the changing requirements of international contracting
Predicament	Oil price changes, political conflicts, finance, design and engineering capabilities
Fixed qualities	Courage, risk loving nature, dedication, self-motivation

It is argued that managers subjectively select facts from the past and order them into epic plot structures. Narratives about the past are hence shaped by an individual's vision for the future. Such narratives can further be understood as identity work whereby temporal identities are continuously tested and negotiated with different audiences. The described research explores such practices on an individual level. But it also pays specific attention to the collective identity narrative created on the sectoral level. Especially important is the epic history of Turkish contractors published by Turkish Contractors Association (TCA) as a 'memory book' (Tayanç, 2011). It describes the internationalization of Turkish contracting sector as an epic adventure whereby heroes overcome the adversaries of high-risk markets with great courage and dedication (Duman *et al.*, 2017). In Gabriel's (2000) Terminology, the TCA book can be understood as an attempt to create a sectoral 'mythology' to reinforce desired sectoral values. It is argued that the creation of such an epic narrative on the sectoral level serves a clear strategic purpose in projecting the idealised characteristics of Turkish contractors.

RESEARCH METHOD

The empirical study was based on 31 narrative interviews with senior managers from Turkish contracting companies. The interviews were conducted following a systematic analysis on the sectoral formal narrative of Turkish international

contractors (cf. Duman *et al.*, 2017). The previous analysis helped the researchers to understand the collective identity narrative of Turkish international contractors and to identify the individuals who might usefully be interviewed. The interviews were conducted on the basis of generic narrative generating questions (cf. Hopf, 2004). The managers were asked to interpret the development of their organisations within international markets. The use of narrative interviews allowed them articulate their own stories regarding competitiveness and strategy making freely. They were designed to access identity work 'in flight' at a particular point in time (cf. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The ways in which the interviewees create subject position themselves in respect of others is seen to be an important part of the relational aspects of identity (cf. Brown and Phua, 2011). The interviewer played an active role as a 'fellow-traveller' in the telling of the narratives by asking clarifying questions or making comments to encourage the managers to elucidate further (Gabriel, 2000). The data analysis started with developing codes according to the most repeated phrases and the concepts. The sectoral level narrative of TCA and the researchers' knowledge of the strategy literature informed this process. Subsequent cycles of the analysis focused on refining the initial codes and elaborating narrative elements of the epic plot structure.

FINDINGS: THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

The individual narratives revealed strong commonalities with the epic sectoral narrative as presented by the TCA. Although different events and actors were stressed by different managers, the common tendency was to depict themselves as heroes of the international markets. The focus on the heroes' journey was described in terms of expanding into new markets, increasing penetration in current markets and moving up the value chain to deliver more complex projects. There was also a recurring emphasis on describing the role of other characters such as helpers, adversaries and villains. The difficulties which the heroes had to overcome were described in great detail, thereby echoing one of the key characteristics of an epic plot structure. However, there was also a strong consensus regarding the sector's heroic attributes of abiding courage, risk acceptance and dedication despite all challenges. Indeed, these features were consistently described as 'second nature' to Turkish construction managers. Taking pride in the job was seemingly of note, but the interviewees also at times gave indications of anger, despair and envy. The dominant epic plot structure therefore off and on contained elements of tragedy which can also be seen as key components of identity construction. The managers promoted themselves and their firms as symbolic of Turkish contractors' epic struggle for success. There was a notable consistency in emphasizing a collective identity as 'heroes of international contracting'.

Who is the hero? The contest between 'I' and 'the company'

The interviewees were keen to emphasize the key roles which they saw themselves as having played in the success of Turkish contractors. The narrative interviews hence provided windows into the processes by means of which managers constructed their own sense of self-identity. They also illustrated the ways in which the interviewees drew resources from pre-existing collective identities as enshrined within the formalised TCA narrative. While some managers cast themselves as the hero of the company, others attributed such roles to the owner-leaders or other senior managers. For example, a vice-president strongly emphasised himself as the hero of the firm:

I was experienced in [my previous organizations], in oil and gas and I came here now and I bring my expertise here. That is why we have got a project, oil and gas projects

now. We are doing a refinery now, doing power plants. I bring my experience here. So, experience means your network, your people, I know the people (Interviewee 2; 2017)

Above quotation emphasizes the perceived importance of individuals in shaping the trajectory of the organisation. While the managers from relatively younger companies tended to focus on their own individual identity, the managers from the first generation of Turkish contractors more often emphasized the collective identity. On those occasions when 'I' language turned to 'we', the company leaders were described as the visionary heroes who shaped the trajectory of the company. Hence the attribution of heroic role tended to be fluid rather than fixed. Some managers accredited the company leader with great respect and admiration, thereby expressing a sense of pride in being part of such firms. Others however conceptualized these strong leaders as barriers to the progression of their own 'modernising' vision for the firm. This continuous juxtaposition between the level of the individual and that of the collective is in itself an important aspect of identity work.

Other characters: Relational aspects of identity construction

The individual narratives were also often notable for the way in which the managers ascribed subject positions to other characters. Especially apparent was the collective identity assigned to Turkish employees -with no small sense of national pride. The self-motivated and flexible characteristics of the Turkish employees was repeatedly cited as a key helper. The argument was frequently made with reference to the employees available to Western contractors who were seen to be reluctant to move beyond their comfort zone. In contrast, Turkish employees were seen to be more willing to sacrifice their personal life to work in often harsh conditions:

We are very hardworking company... starting from bosses to every professional in the company... I remember at that time [several project deliveries in a year] we didn't do vacations; everything was postponed until the completion. Everyone without bothering anything, with the excuses from their families... DU: What is the motivation behind this? BU: I can proudly say at that time we felt this power to become a mega contractor from a small contractor, and each of us took part and felt that we are a part of something important, not for only to that country also for our own country (Interviewee 3, 2017).

The above quote is again representative of identity work, not only on the individual level, but also on the level of the organization. The emphasis on the dedication displayed by all involved was seen as an essential component of becoming a mega contractor. It is also indicative of a tendency to draw from supposedly national characteristics for the purposes of legitimisation. The common point of reference was the depiction of Turkish people as 'madly hardworking'. The extent to which this is true is not the issue. The important point is the way in which this collective self-identity is continually reinforced as being of vital importance to the continued success of Turkish international contractors.

The Turkish Government emerged as another key actor who was depicted on occasion having shaped the journey as a hero, but interestingly it was more often positioned as an adversary. The interviewees frequently emphasized that the Turkish government should lobby more strongly on behalf of the contracting sector. This was seen to relate not only to establishing networks in new markets, but also to providing more support in the development of the financial capabilities required to enable Turkish firm to compete more effectively with their counterparts. Other national governments were seen to be much more supportive than tended to be the case with the Turkish government. Of particular interest was a perceived lack of policy stability on the part of the Turkish government:

The developed countries like the US or UK have this overall long term strategies, we do not have, I mean when I say we, the Turkish government ... this mismanagement in the foreign affairs causes a lot more to the contractors, and also to Turkish economy. This is the lack of government. You know the crises with Russia, what it cost to the contractors, to tourism sector, you can imagine... (Interviewee 3, 2017).

The preceding quotation is suggestive that identity construction extends beyond describing the characteristics of the main characters to ascribing subject positions to others parties in the narrative. For most of the managers interviewed, the instability and unpredictability of the government is the key reason for recent reductions in the recorded annual international turnover of Turkish contractors.

The heroic journey of Turkish contractors was frequently described as a 'market war' against powerful Western and Chinese companies. When asked about the future prospects of Turkish contractors in international markets, several interviewees cited state-backed Chinese contractors as the key villains. The shared narratives often displayed aspects of envy in terms of the government support enjoyed by Chinese contractors. This was especially evident in respect of the African market:

For example, all the administrators I talked in Africa complains about the Chinese, they [Africans] think Chinese do not do good job, they do not do quality job, they break their promises but they [Africans] are still helpless [because China comes with money] ... (Interviewee 13, 2017)

The above quote is again indicative of identity work by labelling Chinese contractors as 'low quality', with a direct inference that Turkish contractors see themselves as champions of quality. Such explanations were often followed by the phrases such as 'the Turkish quality'. In contrast, Western contractors tended to be characterised by slow working practices, higher prices and duplicitous claim management practices. These statements again highlight Turkish firms as offering high quality with relatively low prices. The collective identity of Turkish contractors would seem to be especially strongly identified with high client satisfaction. Such labelling of others reflects the relational aspects of identity work in terms of depicting how Turkish contractors position themselves against their competitors (cf. Brown and Phua, 2011). Creating such a strong collective identity for Turkish contracting is arguably the very essence of strategy work.

The focus of the epic journey and the challenges faced on the way

Expansion into new markets and adapting to the changing demands of international contracting were repeatedly outlined as the current challenges faced by the heroes of Turkish contractors. The managers repeatedly positioned themselves as the 'masters of contracting' by emphasizing the experience gained in different markets across several decades. Such narratives tended to shift the focus of identity work from the individual level to the organizational level. Some narratives sought to address the issue on the sectoral level. Phrases such as 'the clients know that we can do the work on site' emerged as common points of reference. The extension of this to the sectoral level was 'Turks can deliver the project no matter what happens'. But more important than the targeted markets was the emphasis on moving upwards in the value chain from contracting to being able to undertake Engineering Procurement and Construction (EPC) Projects in specialized sectors, especially industrial and energy projects. There was a strong narrative that Turkish firms need to progress to the delivery of integrated construction services. The narratives were further strengthened by projecting international contracting in terms of league tables:

Turkish contractors are not too many in this league. I would say this is the first league that is a very specific field that not too many companies manage to enter that. [Why?] Because of client requirements, they say that to be eligible for such projects, you should have this much turn over, you should complete this type of projects, there are so many requirements, not only technical but also financial, but also past experience, so on. So that is a different level which international companies are playing with better margins, not too many Turkish companies there yet I believe (Interviewee 16, 2017).

The above quote is clearly indicative of identity work in seeking to persuade the firm to move upstream to EPC. An especially key message was the development of design, engineering and financial capabilities in addition to being 'masters of contracting'. This emerged as one of the strongly stressed points in both the individual and formal narratives. The same point was also emphasized by the TCA representative:

From now on, our firms started to remain in classical contractors' class. So, we know how to make a road project or dam project, but the projects are not to call a contractor to do the construction part, there is no job like this anymore. There is EPC, and now it is plus with finance (Interviewee 12, 2017).

The key message of the preceding quotation and several other similar ones is that Turkish firms must escape from the identity of being 'muddy boots contractors' or accept the tragedy of market lose. Similarly, the decrease in oil prices and increasing instability in key defined markets were also positioned as challenges to be overcome. But the interviewees were also keen to ascribe an identity to themselves as quick responders to such shifts:

...the oil prices dropped and global market narrowed... because of the aircraft crises with Russia...we are not allowed to enter in the bids...So, we decided to find another area... Another region, another country, another climate, so which we are not aware of. Of course we have some knowledge but I mean we have no experience, so what we did, we established our core team, heavily experienced in airport projects also we... imported others [managers] who have experienced in Gulf Region (Interviewee 13, 2017).

What is notable in the above quotation is the identity work emphasizing that when a crisis emerges in one market, the heroes can easily move to another. As such, the depiction of the Turkish people as courageous and dedicated to dealing with the challenges of chaotic markets was evident across several interviews. A similar reference was made to the prospective opportunities in Middle Eastern markets by stating that 'if there is peace in the Middle East, again, everybody will be scared to enter but we will be the pioneers'. There is hence an enduring optimism at work whereby each setback is presented as an opportunity.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper positions organizations as temporal, polyphonic social constructions in which individuals continuously rehearse and co-construct their self-identities. The empirical work has demonstrated how strategizing activity can be considered as identity work. Drawing from the 'narrative turn' in strategy research, the notion of an epic plot structure has been presented as an analytical tool. The research described provides an innovative interpretation of identity work in the Turkish international contracting sector. The empirical work highlights the tendency of Turkish managers to depict themselves as heroes of international contracting. Although the primary unit of analysis relates to individual level narratives, the empirical data also portrays the continuous juxtaposition between the individual level and that of the collective. The findings illustrate that the identity work occurs at the nexus where narratives on different levels continuously overlap and interact. Identities are never fixed and

stable, and the processes of identity construction are multi-faceted and constantly contested. Managers can be seen to draw from temporal narratives about the past to legitimize their strategic visions for the future. Hence strategy is not an observable material practice that can easily be accessed. However, new insights can be gained by viewing strategy through the lens of identity work. In essence, strategy becomes inseparable from the identity work with which individuals continuously engage. Practitioners like to talk about strategy; it bolsters their sense of self-identity. It also portrays their sense of self-identity to others. It is suggested that such processes are continuously enacted through narratives, and are hence best explored through narrative analysis.

The analysis demonstrates that the attribution of the heroic role shifts not only between interviews, but also on occasion within the course of a single interview. The notion of epic stories is of central importance to the described success of Turkish contractors. This is evident not only with the recited stories but also within the formalised narratives on the sectoral level. The clear depiction of the subject positions attributed to other characters illustrates the relational aspects of identity construction. By labelling various characters as helpers, adversaries and villains, the managers make sense of the roles others play in the epic story of Turkish contracting. Such narratives continuously conflate issues of strategy with issues of identity construction. A recurring emphasis on the courage, dedication and risk attitudes of the identified heroes further provides a set of strategic resources for the future. Especially important is the use of epic plot structure as a means of evoking feelings of pride and honour. As might be expected from identity narratives, the managers were skilled in crafting heroic role for themselves. The significance of such narratives does not lie in the facts, but in the meaning they create for others (Gabriel, 2000). Their purpose is to grab the attention and commitment of others, thereby paving the way for future actions. While the findings here are based on the case of Turkish contractors, the study is seen to contribute to the construction management literature in two ways. First, it extends strategy research in the field by conceptualizing the identity work as a strategic practice. Second, it extends the methodological debate by mobilizing the notions of literary plot structures to guide the empirical analysis.

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